

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision

Columbia Association, Village Boards & Village Managers

Meeting Summary

October 20, 2007

This document summarizes the discussion held at a County-sponsored public meeting for the Columbia Association Board of Directors, Village Board members and Village Managers. The purpose of the meeting was to solicit input by Columbia representatives about the Department of Planning and Zoning's draft framework document. About 54 people, including 33 Columbia representatives, 7 DPZ staff members and 14 other participants from the public attended the meeting. Comments are organized by topic rather than the order in which comments were made.

Introduction

Marsha McLaughlin welcomed and thanked everyone for attending. She invited all to participate in DPZ's month-long series of public events. At the meeting Marsha asked the Columbia Association and Village representatives for their comments on how the framework may affect the villages and CA open space, facilities and programs. Marsha noted CA's importance in this dialogue because they are the second largest property owner in Downtown.

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision Presentation

Bill Mackey presented a summary of the County's vision framework document. Based on question received from the Focus Group on October 10, 2007, four slides were added to the presentation to clarify the adoption process in Appendix A and the traffic study summarized in Appendix B. The presentation is available at: <http://www.howardcountymd.gov/downtowncolumbia>.

Marsha McLaughlin invited first the representatives of Columbia and then the public to address the audience with their comments and questions.

Process

Several speakers thanked the County for holding these meetings and for extending the comment period to November 16, 2007. As neighbors of Downtown, village representatives expressed their appreciation for being included in these discussions. Some speakers expressed concern that the developer would not be required to follow the framework; others felt the concepts in the framework were not expressed clearly and consistently. These speakers feared that project review would remain at the same, currently unsatisfactory, level because developers have no long-term interests in Downtown. Plans should benefit residents not just developers, and the villages should have an opportunity to give input on anything that might affect them.

Staff explained that implementation would be mandated in the zoning phase. For example, there will be green buildings because the County Council already has adopted legislation requiring green buildings. For other issues, such as affordable housing and public art, the framework challenges the property owners to be creative rather than merely reacting to one specified idea by the County. Since the developer will be the one to balance providing amenities with funding to support amenities, the framework allows developers to present options to the community.

Pedestrian Connections

Several speakers voiced complaints about the existing pedestrian experience in Downtown, stating that the walk from Vantage Point to Clyde's on Little Patuxent Parkway is unpleasant because of fast traffic without any buffers, such as trees or parked cars, as well as narrow sidewalks. Also, there are no pedestrian amenities such as benches, overhangs providing shade or windows to look

into along the way. The pedestrian bridge from Downtown to Oakland Mills was also mentioned as unattractive and unsafe.

A number of speakers emphasized the need for pedestrian connections from Symphony Woods to the Lakefront, from The Hug statue to the GGP building and from Downtown to the Oakland Mills Village Center. One speaker was also concerned about requiring a useable width for the proposed promenade between the Mall and Symphony Woods.

Vehicular Connections

Some attendees advocated for easier connections to the villages from Downtown, citing that even by car, it is difficult to get from one village to another. Also, a connection to Blandair is desirable. A transportation web, more than a grid, throughout Columbia would be an efficient way to provide connections. Additionally, there are other areas, such as the Lakefront and the open space near Vantage Point, where cars should not be allowed. Some speakers stated they would not welcome any change to Wincopin Circle. One speaker mentioned the tension between the various modes of travel: cars, buses, bicyclists and pedestrians. Also, residents may want to park their cars close to or inside their buildings. They would not want to park at a transportation center instead of their building. Another speaker asked if parking would be free in Downtown.

Several speakers expressed interest in having transit connections. Cited as an example, Columbia's sister city in France has a metro system that serves high-rise apartment buildings at their front doors. Internally, Columbia needs transit stops not only in Downtown but also in village centers. Externally, light rail from Columbia could connect to the metro extension that would serve Fort Meade. These connections must be planned now and not be deferred until later. One speaker suggested that because people do not like buses, Columbia should have more innovative modes of travel like small shuttles. These shuttles might best serve the web system envisioned for Columbia's center and villages.

It was suggested that if traffic congestion occurs on US 29 and MD 32, then it would increase traffic through the Village of Hickory Ridge. Likewise, there was concern about improvements to MD 175 causing back ups at signals.

Environment

Environmental issues were the concern of some speakers. Downtown must not become a heat sink. Trees are needed in Downtown to help with global warming issues. The LEED standards are not strong enough or visionary enough to get a model green Downtown Columbia. The framework document should show buildings that are environmentally friendly, such as buildings with green roofs, solar panels and wind power devices. An environmental impact study of where buildings and impervious areas are placed and their environmental consequences should be prepared. Efforts should be made to support native plants and birds. One speaker inquired whether the vision framework document has an artificial divide between open space and public space. Staff explained that the new public space would be County-owned, while new open space would be CA-owned land.

Design

Some speakers had suggestions on architectural design. To create a human scale, the height of a building is less important than making the lower three floors of the building pedestrian-friendly. Others suggested that architectural competitions should be held to achieve outstanding buildings for Columbia. New development in Columbia should avoid continuing the recent mediocre design. Also, others expressed that the new "movie set" type of downtown would also be inappropriate for Columbia. One member suggested that the American Institute of Architects (AIA) could help with a design team. Some thought the vision framework document should include building height limits. Others stated that Columbia could learn from the vision of the Maple Lawn development.

Other Issues

Several speakers listed the need for a full spectrum of housing not just in the Downtown but for the entire County. Another concern was Wegman's and its effect on retail business in the villages. One speaker supported rebuilding the fire station at its current site.

Collaboration among property owners was raised as a possible requirement for the framework document. It was mentioned that the framework document and the traffic study have different geographic boundaries. The traffic study included a much larger area to study traffic impacts. A map of ownership was requested. It is posted at www.howardcountymd.gov/downtowncolumbia.

Closing Comments

Marsha McLaughlin thanked the attendees for their thoughtful comments that would help staff in preparing the next version of the framework. CA has an opportunity to influence GGP's plans. CA will need to decide how it wants to influence the plans and how to use its leverage. Ultimately, the County Council will develop the "shalls" or requirements of the plan.

Before ending the meeting Marsha McLaughlin recognized the elected officials who attended: Mary Kay Sigaty and Jen Terrasa, also Melania Pender, Calvin Ball's aide. Marsha noted the presence of Jessica Feldmark and Ian Kennedy from the County Administration. Marsha thanked Delegate Bobo for encouraging the State to look at transit connections to Columbia as part of the Washington Metro Green Line extension study. Delegate Bobo expressed her hope that GGP would hold forums for their plan prior to its consideration by the Planning Board. Delegate Bobo suggested that DPZ hold such meetings if GGP does not. The meeting closed with a reminder that the public comment period has been extended through November 16, 2007. Also, anyone wishing to answer the open house survey questions are welcome to do so on the County's Downtown Columbia web site.

Attendees:

Columbia Reps

Atkinson-Stewart, Pearl
Broida, Gail
Cederbaum, Sandy
Coffman, Miles
Coren, Ann
Coren, Evan
Cornell, Michael
Coyle, Cynthia
Dagenais, Henry
Gray, Karen
Harrison, Todd
Hughes, Mike
Kirsch, Phil
Kish, Bernice
Knauft, Burt
Laidig, Patricia
Marando, Vincent
Madzel, Rich
Meskin, Stephen
O'Connor, Tom

Odum, Linda
Pivar, Mary
Richardson, Lee
Rose, Evan
Santos, Bill
Smith, Susan
Stack, Andrew
Toback, Rhoda
Waller, Suzanne
Wengel, Linda
Wertman, Barbara
Woodcock, Bill
Zaret, Shari

Public

Bobo, Liz (Delegate)
Donaldson, Ray
Feldmark, Jessica
Kennedy, Ian
Knowles, Lloyd
Lasser, Caryn

Lincoln, Emily
Malone, Jud
Moon, Jean
Pender, Melania
Rose, Jackie
Sigaty, Mary Kay
Terrasa, Jen
Wilson, Richard

Press

Arney, June
Mangus, Becky

DPZ

McLaughlin, Marsha
Lafferty, Stephen
Hilsenrath, Mina
Mackey, Bill
Clay, Randy
Sprenkle, Tom
Stoney, Samantha